



U. S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE

News Release

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Seeking Public Input on a Process to Conserve Florida Manatees

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announced today that it is seeking public comment regarding the preparation of a draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that will evaluate alternatives for structuring and implementing incidental take regulations currently being developed for Florida manatees under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

The Florida manatee is a federally protected species under both the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973 and the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) of 1972, as amended. Both the ESA and the MMPA prohibit "take" - causing death, injury or harassment - of listed species, without specific authorization. To date, there is no authorization contained in MMPA regulations for the incidental, unintentional death, injury or harassment of manatees caused by otherwise legal activities.

The Service has started the development process for special incidental take regulations, which could ensure that governmental agencies and the public comply with the MMPA by addressing government activities related to watercraft and watercraft access facilities, and their effects on manatees and manatee habitat.

"It is our goal in this process to pull together local, state and Federal manatee conservation efforts and improve manatee protection, while providing more efficient and predictable regulatory programs for watercraft-related activities," said Sam Hamilton, the Service's Southeast Regional Director. "We are producing an EIS to accompany the proposed regulations, but before we begin writing it we are seeking public input."

Hamilton said that the Service is looking for input on five specific topics:

- suggestions regarding the range of alternatives to be considered in the EIS;
- information on the direct, secondary and cumulative effects of this rulemaking on manatees, manatee habitat, and other aspects of the human environment;
- information regarding the potential social and economic effects of the proposed regulations;

- MORE -



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2/2 - Draft EIS for manatee regulations

- information on potential mitigation measures, including technological measures, that would result in the least negative impact on manatees and their habitat, and;
- ways to measure, monitor and report the effects of incidental take on manatees.

People interested in participating can address or deliver their comments to Pete Benjamin, Jacksonville Field Office, 6620 Southpoint Drive, Suite 310, Jacksonville, FL 32216-0958. Comments may also be faxed to 904-232-2404. E-mail comments may be addressed to manatee@fws.gov, with "MMPA Draft EIS" in the subject line. Comments submitted electronically should be as ASCII text files or in the body of the message, please include your name and mailing address in your e-mail. All comments must be received by July 25, 2002.

The Notice of Intent to Prepare an Environmental Impact State (EIS) was published in the *Federal Register* on June 10, 2002. Publication of this Notice is in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and also complies with one provision of the settlement of the lawsuit *Save the Manatee Club et al v Ballard*.

Additional information on special IRT development is available online at <http://northflorida.fws.gov>.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses almost 538 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies.

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